

Agency founder helps aged stay at home

By Dottie Ashley
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Grace Beahm
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Mary Peters (third from left on second row) proudly wears her No. 30 basketball shirt at St. Andrew's High School, where the girls basketball team won the state championship in 1970.

About Mary

BORN: In Columbia in 1952; moved to Charleston at 13.

TITLE: President of Care for Life, a geriatric care management home care and guardianship service that she founded in 1995.

EDUCATION: Bachelor of Arts in psychology, University of South Carolina; master's in occupational therapy, Virginia Commonwealth University; postmaster's certification in health services administration, George Washington University.

FAMILY: Husband, Jack Thomson, who owns and operates S.C. Civil War Walking Tours; brother, Tommy Peters; parents, Vera and Ben Peters, all of Charleston.

GOAL OF CARE FOR LIFE: To enable aging individuals to remain in their homes for as long as possible.

WHAT I LOVE ABOUT MY JOB: Working with a team of professionals and helping elderly people who otherwise would be forgotten.

WHAT I LEAST LIKE ABOUT MY JOB: Having to tell elderly people they are no

longer safe living at home because they have issues such as taking their medications incorrectly, not practicing good nutrition or proper hygiene, have frequent falls or have unaddressed medical problems they can't communicate to doctors.

SUCCESS STORY: "If it weren't for Care for Life, my father would not be alive today," says Jim Watkins, whose father, 87, has dementia and other medical problems but still lives in his own home on James Island. Watkins, who is from Charleston but now lives in Florida, said he had tried other agencies, but Care for Life has shown his father the most compassion. "Dad just didn't want to go into a nursing home," says Watkins. "Now Care for Life looks after him 24/7, takes him to doctor's appointments, to get his hair cut and dresses him neatly. It's a quality of life everyone deserves. I hope Dad lives to be 100."

FUN ENCOUNTER: When Mary met her husband, Jack, at a coffee hour at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, she says, "I noticed his wide smile, but also his green polyester sports coat with very wide lapels, and I thought, 'There's a real story there.' " After a two-year courtship, they were married in 1996.

'Some people have a soul that smiles," says Valerie White, referring to staffers at Care for Life, a local company that provides home care for the elderly.

White's life had become a nightmare after her father, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, became physically and verbally abusive. An educator and single mother, White moved last summer from New York to Charleston to care for her father.

She contacted several local Alzheimer's-care agencies, but they were of little help. Then one day in an alterations shop, she spilled her story to a kind woman who suggested she call Care for Life.

"When I walked, sobbing, into Care for Life's office, (staffer) Sheryl O'Neal gently listened to me and then said, 'You need to meet Mary Peters,' " recalls White. "And somehow, relief just washed over me, as Mary then calmly said, 'We can help you.' "

Peters, who founded Care for Life in 1995, a for-profit business that assists with keeping the elderly at home under medical management, got in touch with a geriatric specialist that White had been trying to see for months.

"I was amazed," says White. "Mary got us an appointment for the very next day."

After being hospitalized for a time and given the proper medication, her father, 73, has calmed down to the point that White is free enough to start looking for a full-time job.

Oldsters are fun

Lazy days spent on the maple-shaded porches in Columbia talking with her great-grandmother and grandmother made Peters aware that elderly people were interesting

and fun, and not at all like the stodgy images often projected on television.

"I still remember my grandmother's lively, colorful friends who would come over to her house to play bridge once a week," says Peters. "And my entire family went to church to hear my grandmother sing in the choir."

But one afternoon on Edisto Avenue, her great-grandmother, Lula B. Crowder, who was around 90, had a serious talk with Mary, then a child. "I'm probably not going to be here that much longer," she said, "and I want to prepare you for what could happen."

Luckily, her great-grandmother lived to 95. In fact, two weeks before she died, she was busy vacuuming in her home.

"That taught me a lesson," says Peters, 56. The lesson learned was that the longer a person is able to stay in his own home, the longer he lives and the happier he seems to be.

She became a nationally certified geriatric care manager and opened Care for Life, employing 85 carefully selected caregivers.

"Some people will hire just about anyone who is willing to stay with an elderly relative," says Peters. "But our caregivers are screened through FBI checks and references and must have at least two years' experience in home health care before we hire them for Care for Life."

Peters' 10-member office staff includes a certified nurse who regularly visits in the homes of patients to make certain the quality of their care meets certain standards.

Also, Care for Life has a physician on call 24 hours a day who can be contacted by a caregiver if needed.

When one of Peters' clients does have to be moved to a nursing home, Peters keeps constant contact with him to make certain he is satisfied. Recently, she had a patient moved from one assisted-living home to another because the patient was unhappy there.

Peters began her career as an occupational therapist and then worked as a lobbyist in Washington, D.C., for the American Occupational Therapy Association and later for the National Association of Private Psychiatric Hospitals. Part of that time, she lobbied the Congressional Health-Writing Committees on behalf of issues such as Medicare, Medicaid and reimbursement for providers and hospitals.

As a lobbyist, Peters explains, "My job was to get Congress to allow occupational therapy to be paid for by Medicare. Rep. Lindy Boggs of Louisiana sponsored the bill,

along with others, but it took several years to get it through Congress."

Framed on the wall at Care for Life is the reminder: "Abuse and neglect of the elderly is a crime, whether physical, psychological or financial exploitation."

Peters says, "Many elderly are not aware that if they don't deed their home to their children or relatives before a certain time before becoming disabled that often they can't qualify for a Medicaid bed."

Care for Life keeps track of which local assisted-living centers will allow Medicaid beds and those that accept strictly private pay. Also, Peters is aggressive in maintaining contact with those who can help her mission, such as Dr. Leslie Pelzer, who owns Charleston House Calls.

"I believe Mary's home health caregivers are the best, and I've been very impressed when I go into a patient's home and see how professional these caregivers are," Pelzer says.

Although she runs a for-profit business, Peters also does pro bono work making referrals to the Alzheimer's Association and the Trident Area Agency on Aging so clients can apply for grants for home care.

"When somebody calls here, even if they can't pay, I always try to put them in touch with an agency or a person that can help them," says Peters. "Remember, we all may be in this situation one day, and planning is the only answer, no matter how much money you may or may not have."

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